

## **Save meals program**

Gov. Mark Sanford's proposal to cut state funding for the Meals on Wheels program for elderly South Carolinians is not only heartless, it also is false economy. Nearly 5,500 low-income South Carolina seniors are served by Meals on Wheels. The program had a budget of about \$11 million last year, with more than \$8 million coming from the federal government and \$2.9 million allocated by the state in matching funds.

Last year, the state contribution was funded through a one-time supplemental spending bill. Senior advocate groups throughout the state and Lt. Gov. Andre Bauer, who oversees the Office on Aging, have asked lawmakers to make the \$2.9 million allocation permanent to ensure that thousands of elderly residents would continue to be served.

But Sanford's budget proposal would cut the \$2.9 billion. He argues that, with an economic downturn, making the funding permanent would be difficult. Sanford also notes that this issue underscores the problem with using one-time funding to pay for a recurring expense.

We agree with the governor that the failure to assure steady sources of funding for multi-year programs has been a bad habit on the part of the Legislature. Nonetheless, we can't see the sense of trying to teach state lawmakers a lesson by cutting off meals to thousands of senior citizens. Besides, proponents of continuing the program are trying to get lawmakers to do the responsible thing and provide permanent funding for Meals on Wheels.

But continuing to give these elderly South Carolinians one hot meal a day -- and some attention from the people who deliver them -- also makes good economic sense. For many of these seniors -- including 147 in York County -- that one meal can be the only thing allowing them to live independently in their homes. Without it, they would have to move to nursing homes.

Nursing home placements cost an average of \$45,000 a year. Undernourished seniors also are more likely to fall, a primary reasons for hospital admissions among the elderly, and an overnight hospital stay for people 60 and older costs Medicare about \$25,000.

The math is straightforward. Providing meals to homebound seniors is less expensive than paying for nursing home or hospital care.

As Lt. Gov. Bauer put it, "That's the conservative approach to government." Sanford, in trying to make a philosophical point about funding recurring expenses, misses the point altogether.

Providing meals for the needy elderly is both compassionate and practical. We hope lawmakers find the money to make the state contribution permanent.

## **IN SUMMARY**

State lawmakers need to find funds to create a permanent Meals on Wheels program.

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